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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000634

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: NON-HIZBALLAH SHIA VOICES ON NATIONAL
DIALOGUE--SUSPICION AND DOUBT AIMED AT HIZBALLAH AND AMAL

REF: BEIRUT 124

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In the national dialogue set to begin March 2, Lebanese Shia will be represented by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.

Econoff interviewed three prominent independent Shia politicians, all of whom said that the Shia community does not expect progress. In fact, most Shia want to avoid any discussion of Hizballah's arms or any decision on major national issues. The politicians, Riad al-Asad, Mohammad Baydun, and Salah Harake, said that even their moderate Shia constituency either did not care to be involved or had rallied around Nasrallah due to inflammatory statements by March 14 leaders such as Walid Jumblatt and Samir Ja'Ja'. Gridlock was the desired outcome. For Berri, his return to relevancy is his main goal in hosting the conference regardless of the outcome, they said. Two academics with contacts in Hizballah separately told econoff that Nasrallah will quietly avoid any progress or decision-making at the conference. Hizballah rank-and-file members are opposed to Nasrallah's participation, but he will attend to keep up the appearance that Hizballah is open to dialogue. End summary.

DIALOGUE IS
A SHOW; SAY CONSTITUENCY
BACKS GRIDLOCK

2. (C) The national dialogue under the auspices of Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, scheduled to begin March 2, will seat two leaders -- Berri and Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah -- to represent the Lebanese Shia community.

Shia politicians who ran against the Amal-Hizballah alliance in the 2005 parliamentary elections and Shia MPs in other parties will not be represented. One such Shia politician is Riad al-Asad, who gained a greater share of the vote than any other independent Shia parliamentary candidate in the south with 12 percent. Al-Asad told econoff on March 1 that Nasrallah and Berri act as if Shia outside of Hizballah and Amal don't exist. However, Al-Asad said that his constituency will not raise any objections to Nasrallah and Amal representing the Shia community. His supporters, like most Shia, are nervously watching the March 14 alliance, particularly Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Shia are afraid that Jumblatt will start violence in Beirut, or in the Chouf area, that could cut the highway to the south. Popular rumors in the Shia community state that Jumblatt is arming

his supporters as are the Sunni extremists in the Ad-dinniyeh area of northern Lebanon. The Shia versus Sunni and Druze split is widening, according to al-Asad.

13. (C) Besides, Al-Asad continued, no one in the Shia community expects any progress to be made at Berri's national dialogue. Al-Asad believes Berri is interested in the dialogue taking place rather than any tangible outcome. Nasrallah's interests in the dialogue will be to preserve Hizballah's arms and to reaffirm the legitimacy of the "resistance," according to Al-Asad. He added that Nasrallah will also seek to calm Shia-Sunni tensions. Al-Asad did not expect Nasrallah to make any concessions. Hizballah will not willingly accept disarmament. Instead, Al-Asad expected Nasrallah to shift the conversation to "Taif II," a concept discussed privately in Shia circles (reftel). Al-Asad saw "Taif II" as further changes that would reflect the growing Christian-Muslim demographic imbalance in favor of the Muslims. He suggested that "Taif II" might include a confessional rotation of the three top posts whereby one each would still be held by a Maronite, Sunni, and Shia, but the designation would change every few years. For example, the speakership would go to a Sunni, the presidency to a Shia, and the premiership to a Maronite, and then would rotate again. Another part of "Taif II" would be the formation of two houses of parliament.

14. (C) In a separate meeting on March 1, former Tyre MP Mohammad Baydun also expected Berri's national dialogue to accomplish nothing. Without Egyptian and Saudi intervention, a national dialogue is doomed to fail, according to Baydun. Baydun, now an independent Shia politician after being banished from Amal, said that Hizballah will reject any plans to disarm. Rather, Baydun heard from sources, Nasrallah and Berri will ask for firm guarantees that Hizballah will keep

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its arms for six years in exchange for removing President Emile Lahoud from power. Baydun did not think Berri would abandon his alliance with Hizballah because Berri is "very much a coward." Berri did not care whether anything is accomplished at his own conference, snorted Baydun, because he just wants to show that he is playing a national role.

15. (C) Baydun did not see any opposition in the Shia community to being represented by Nasrallah and Berri. He explained that the militants in the Shia community long ago hijacked Shia policy. Shia "elites," such as bankers, businessmen, and intellectuals gave up any say in Shia leadership. While Baydun opposed both Hizballah and Amal, he would not raise any objections either. It is just too difficult to set up a new party; he didn't have the human or material resources. In Baydun's opinion, Hizballah is now the undisputed leader of the Shia community with its junior partner, Amal, in tow.

16. (C) Separately on March 1, former MP Salah Harake concurred that the Shia community does not anticipate any decision at the national dialogue. In fact, most Shia probably hope that no progress is made, according to Harake. He said that the Shia community has rallied around Nasrallah and he estimated that at least 80 percent of Shia support the Amal-Hizballah alliance. The other 20 percent, Shia who support Western-orientated independents like Harake, are content to sit on the sidelines without questioning the decisions of Nasrallah and Berri. Harake explained that Hizballah and Amal captured the majority of Shia votes, so Nasrallah and Berri are entitled to represent the Shia. Harake was concerned about growing confessional tensions working up support for Hizballah from Shia who would not normally back Hizballah. He said that many of his secular Shia friends (those who drink alcohol and allow their wives to wear Western beach dress) have said that if Nasrallah calls for demonstrations they will participate. Harake said that many Shia are convinced that the March 14 coalition is behaving in an arrogant and belligerent manner.

17. (C) Harake opined that Berri is in a no-lose situation. Just by holding the dialogue, Berri is taking the national stage and is playing a role normally played by the President. If the dialogue were to beat the odds and somehow succeed, then Berri will be a major national leader and will be assured that he will hold onto the speakership for years to come. If the dialogue fails, then Berri will simply say that it is not his fault. He will point to the fact that he tried and will reap the temporary prestige of being the only leader to bring all the key confessional leaders to one room.

NASRALLAH
PARTICIPATING AGAINST WILL OF
PARTY RANK-AND-FILE

18. (C) On February 28, Hizballah expert Dr. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb of the Lebanese American University told econoff that most Shia expect (and hope) that nothing will be accomplished at the national dialogue. Hizballah officials have told her they oppose Nasrallah's participation in the dialogue. The Hizballah officials consider the conference beneath Nasrallah. Many average Shia have told Saad-Ghorayeb that it is degrading for Nasrallah to sit with the likes of Walid Jumblatt and Samir Ja'Ja', especially after their speeches on February 14. According to Saad-Ghorayeb, Nasrallah himself is disdainful of the national dialogue, but felt compelled to take part for two reasons. First, Nasrallah had promised that Hizballah would participate in any dialogue on its arms. Second, Nasrallah did not want to be accused of sabotaging a national dialogue by not attending. Nonetheless, Nasrallah will seek at every turn in the discussion to derail any agreement on the pressing issues, according to Saad-Ghorayeb. He wants to get through the conference without any decision being reached. For his part, Berri has already achieved his goal by simply hosting the national dialogue, according to Saad-Ghorayeb. He is relevant again (for now) and has shown that Shia are ready to engage in dialogue. Whether anything is accomplished is irrelevant.

19. (C) Former UNIFIL spokesman Timur Goksel told econoff on February 28 that Hizballah officials have confided to him that Nasrallah will stick to his agreement with Aoun throughout the conference. Nasrallah will revert to the points agreed upon with Aoun to halt progress without appearing as the spoiler. According to Goksel, Nasrallah

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will let the conference drag on without anything being accomplished. Goksel expected Nasrallah to keep a low profile as long as Hizballah's weapons are not seriously debated.

COMMENT

110. (C) It is sobering to hear from moderate Shia politicians like al-Asad, Harake, and Baydun that they seem content to step aside and let Nasrallah and Berri speak for them. Also of concern is their testimony that even secular Shia are rallying around Hizballah because of the recent statements by Jumblatt and Ja'Ja'. If even the most moderate of Shia consider March 14's words and actions an affront, it seems that Hizballah will enjoy a solid, unified constituency going into talks with other parties. End comment.
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